

Using a Distance-Learning Component in an EFL Course

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One of the problems of in-company EFL is how to train the maximum number of the company's employees. One way is by teaching very large classes. This, however, affects the quality of the training by reducing the amount of individual attention available to each trainee. At the National Commercial Bank's Training Centre here in Jeddah we have introduced a distance-learning component into our general English courses. By doing so we have managed to reduce the time each employee spends at the training centre on our general English courses from four weeks to two weeks. The "lost" two weeks are replaced by a 10-week self-study manual that the trainees complete at home. They do, however, stay in touch with their teachers during this period and regularly send in part of their work for correction and, more importantly, for valuable feedback and encouragement. This allows the EFL staff at the centre to train almost twice the number of employees in general English.

As well as making English training more cost effective, there are other benefits from adopting this approach. The learners are given the chance to: (1) think about the English language over a period of 12 weeks instead of just four; (2) develop organisational and study skills that could be of use to them and their company at work; and (3) develop confidence in their ability for self-study. This is particularly useful for them after they have left the Training Centre and want to continue studying by themselves with published materials.

Structure and materials

The overall structure of the course can be summarised in this diagram:

	General English Course	
Part 1 Course Week 1	Part 2 Distance Learning Manual	Part 3 Course Week 2

Part 1

During Part 1 of the course the learners attend a one-week course at the training centre. The aim of week 1 is to introduce the learners to the language and skills they require in order to use the distance-learning manual effectively. With elementary learners a large part of the time is devoted to practising the structures introduced and constantly reviewing new vocabulary. With an intermediate or advanced group of learners the introduction of the language items does not have to play such an important part. The emphasis can be on equipping the learners to develop an effective strategy for dealing with new language in their self-study manuals. Learning how to use

a dictionary and guessing the meaning of unknown words are examples of activities that foster the development of such a strategy.

Part 2

This stage involves the learners working at home with a self-study manual. We decided to try to make our manual equivalent in time to two weeks of classroom tuition, and in our case that was equal to about 60 hours. Therefore, we decided to have five units (A, B, C, D, and E), each containing 12 worksheets. Each worksheet is supposed to take the average learner about one hour to complete. The term worksheet here is a little misleading because the “worksheet” could be an audiocassette onto which the learners have to record.

For the elementary learner the manual is designed to offer both accuracy and fluency practice. It is also possible for completely new vocabulary and structures to be introduced, providing the learners can cope. It is more difficult, but by no means impossible, to provide genuine communicative activities to lower-level learners. With more advanced learners it is obviously a lot easier to introduce genuine communicative activities as well as accuracy and fluency practice.

In order to combine accuracy and fluency practice and genuine communicative activities in a self-study manual, three worksheets are grouped together, e.g., A1, A2, and A3. These are considered an integrated subunit. A3 is the worksheet that is to be sent to the teacher for marking and feedback. A1 and A2 are worksheets that prepare the learner for A3, the “send in” worksheet. They usually consist of controlled practice of the structures needed to complete the task in A3. The answers to A1 and A2 are in the manual, and these answers are an important part of the self-study approach.

The learners use the answers as a source of feedback rather than for calculating the percentage of correct answers. Thus A1 and A2 are accuracy practice with definite answers for self-correction, and A3 is either fluency practice or a genuine communicative activity, which the teacher can mark and use to provide useful feedback. The term mark here does not necessarily mean covering the work with a red pen and giving an actual mark, although this may be useful in some teaching situations; rather, the teacher uses the send-in worksheets for diagnostic purposes and directs the learner to review A1 or A2, or in the case of later units, the relevant parts of the manual.

The size of the subunit can, of course, vary according to what is being taught. In our case elementary learners have to send in four worksheets for each unit, for a total of 20. For advanced learners, however, the first 11 worksheets could be used to prepare for a large task such as writing a report. These 11 worksheets could be readings from which the learners have to extract the specific information needed to write the report. For elementary learners, though, it is essential that the exercises in the worksheets are easy to understand, and lots of examples of each exercise have to be provided. A translation of the instructions found in the manual is extremely useful to the learners, provided of course the learners all have the same mother tongue.

Part 3

Having completed the manual, the learners return to the classroom for a further week. The main aim of this week is to practise the language from the first week and the manual in a more communicative way. The emphasis of this week, then, is on fluency work.

Further uses of the distance-learning component

As well as being a part of a general English course, a distance-learning manual could be given to employees whose work does not permit them to attend a course at a training centre. In this case the manual would have to be modified to take into account the fact that the learners did not attend Course Week 1. A second use would be for EFL learners who have just finished a course and want to continue studying English. They could take away a manual from the training centre to continue their studies. By sending in work to their teachers for regular feedback they would not feel the isolation inherent in most self-study situations. This would also help them maintain the English learnt in their previous course, thus making the initial training more effective. There is no reason why this distance-learning approach should be confined to in-company situations. It could be adapted to any EFL situation where time was given to the teachers to write the manuals and mark the send-in worksheets.

Conclusion

It is possible to increase the number of EFL students in an in-company teaching situation by introducing a distance-learning component in order to reduce the time spent in the classroom. The main difference between the above approach and traditional self-study is that the learners are in touch regularly with their teachers, who provide much needed feedback on the learner's work and, perhaps most importantly of all, encouragement. The above structure also allows the teachers some time to prepare the learners for their period of self-study. I am convinced a lot of companies with their own EFL training facilities would be persuaded to adopt a distance-learning project if all the abovementioned benefits to the company were made clear.